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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 LAGOS 000540

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SUBJECT: DELTA VIOLENCE ON RISE, ELECTIONS SUSPENDED

REF: (A) LAGOS 523 (B) LAGOS 192 (C) 2003 LAGOS 2535

Classified By: Classified by: Political Chief Diane Shelby for reasons
1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The rate and level of violence in the Niger Delta has been increasing in recent weeks (ref A). Plans for March 27 elections in several key Local Government Areas (LGA) have been suspended, fueling tension between ethnic groups in the region. Meanwhile, thousands of internally displaced Itsekiri are agitating for a return to their homes as their living conditions steadily worsen. Signs of preparations for renewed conflict between Ijaw and Itsekiri in the riverine areas are reported. If ethnic conflict erupts, the military's reaction is unpredictable as troops are increasingly weary of their Delta deployment and pressure for a solution is mounting on all sides. END SUMMARY.

ITSEKIRIS TO RESIST ELECTION POSTPONEMENT

12. (SBU) Local Government Area (LGA) elections are scheduled nationwide for March 27. The Delta State Government has postponed elections in Warri North, Warri South, and Warri Southwest LGAs, which have seen several spates of violence in the last seven years between rival Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic groups contesting land access, oil revenues, and political power. Attempts to improve relations through peace dialogues have produced mixed results. Although support for NGO-organized peace dialogues is strong (ref B), ethnic groups recently pulled out of the Delta State Government's Inter-Ethnic Dialogue. Delta State Governor James Ibori, whose oft-trumpeted "peace plan" to quell violence in the state is fizzling, championed the dialogue. The dialogue ended when the state government, claiming that all parties were in agreement, unilaterally postponed LGA elections in and around Warri to prevent violence.

13. (C) Daniel Reyenieju, President of the Itsekiri National Youth Congress, on March 8 told POLOFF the Itsekiri oppose the election postponement and will fight the decision in the courts. (Note: In the Nigerian context, youths are young and middle-aged men. End Note.) Reyenieju, along with other prominent Ijaw and Itsekiri elders and youth leaders, had participated in the Inter-Ethnic Dialogue. According to Reyenieju, a discussion about local elections never took place nor was agreed upon by the Itsekiri. Talks broke down and the Itsekiri walked out.

14. (C) Reyenieju was dismayed, frustrated, and angry over the postponement of elections. He fears that when elections do take place, Ijaws will flood the LGAs with non-residents in a bid to rig the outcome. Moreover, he is at odds with the state government's reasoning to postpone elections to avoid an escalation of violence. Violence always accompanies elections in Nigeria, he explained, and stressed that tensions were much greater and violence more commonplace when Ibori and President Olusegun Obasanjo were up for election in April 2003. Ibori, a member of the President's ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), received Itsekiri support in his election bid despite, Reyenieju emphatically said, the displacement of thousands from the Benin River and the burning of Koko, one of the most heavily populated Itsekiri villages, the day before the election. Since March 2003, Reyenieju pointed out that several Ijaw militant youths have been appointed as Special Assistants to the Governor -- a position that brings access to the governor and money.

IJAW SUPPORT ELECTION POSTPONEMENT

15. (C) Daniel Ekpide, Secretar of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FDIC), told POLOFF on March 4 that the election pstponement showed a "serious desire by the state government to resolve issues." The Ijaw have beenagitating for greater political representation wthin the LGAs since 1997. In 1997, the Warri Southwest LGA seat was transferred from an Ijaw village to an Itsekiri village by the state

governmen, sparking intense violence. Each of the three GAS is divided into 10 wards. In each of these LGAs, the Itsekiri hold the plurality of wards and, therefore, control the LGA chairman and chancelorships. As a result, claims of political disenfranchisement have fueled Ijaw demands for ward redistricting and an increase in the number of wards within the LGA. Ekpide has called for ward redistricting based on the most recent 1991 population census, which, he contends, shows the Ijaw are more populous in the region.

16. (C) Contrary to reports on March 10 (refA), Ekpide characterized Warri as calm, claiming there was no tension within the riverine Ijaw areas. He stated the Ijaw were keeping "hush," despite recent attacks by the Itsekiri -- attacks that each group has blamed on the other. Relations with the JTF and police were also categorized as good, despite sporadic skirmishes. He said the Ijaw were cooperating with state government- and NGO-led peace dialogues and blamed the slowing progress on the Itsekiri. Ekpide further described the distressed state of the Ijaw within the riverine area and found fault with the state government for the lack of basic health and education services.

THE DELTA'S INTERNALLY DISPLACED

17. (U) The Nigerian Commission for Refugees reports that 800,000 Nigerians are internally displaced nation-wide due to communal violence, creating volatile pockets throughout Nigeria. In Delta State, 9,000 Itsekiri have been displaced from their homes along the Benin River, and 1,000 Ijaw have fled their homes in Warri Southwest LGA. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Delta State have not received humanitarian aid from the GON, but have instead relied on a \$50,000 grant from the USG implemented by the International Foundation for Education and Self-Help (IFESH). Displaced for almost a year and with living conditions steadily deteriorating, the IDPs are frustrated and edgy. Donor fatigue has set in among their financial supporters. The most acute is the 9,000 Itsekiri IDPs living in and around the Urhobo city of Sapele. Reyenieu reports that children have not been attending school, young girls are forced into prostitution, young men have become criminals, and the weak and elderly are dying (ref C).

18. (SBU) Reyenieu claims the USG has been "lazy" in comparison to its previous aid efforts in the region. Appreciative of past support, he advocates for continued aid, but prefers a longer-term solution and requested that the USG petition the GON to enable IDPs to return to their homes. Ekpide also stated conditions were worsening for Ijaw IDPs in the region. (Note: The USG has been active in the Delta through its initial aid to the IDPs, the funding of two peace dialogues implemented by NGOs, and the recent agreement by Royal Dutch Shell Petroleum and USAID to begin a cassava production program. POLOFF emphasized these programs to Reyenieu, but with the exception of the joint Shell-USAID program, the others are nearing completion and future funding has not yet been identified. End note.)

IMMINENT VIOLENCE NEAR ESCRAVOS?

19. (C) David Beddow, Security Coordinator for Chevron Nigeria Ltd's (CNL) Escravos transfer terminal and tank farm, told ECONOFF on March 8 that "an offensive by the Itsekiri could be imminent." Beddow believes attacks will only be delayed due to lack of fuel and boats. In mid-February, CNL security staff reported to ECONOFF that a group of Ijaw youths in speedboats harassed nearby Itsekiri villages within sight of Escravos. The youths dressed in warrior white, waved white flags and placed one on an oil jetty farther up the Escravos River. During the wave of violence that spread through the Delta swamps in March 2003, workers at the Escravos terminal noted that Ijaw attack parties wore white and displayed white flags during their attacks on Itsekiri villages.

110. (C) Reyenieu confirmed the incident to POLOFF and said the flag staking was symbolic to show that the Ijaw were now claiming the land. When asked if the Itsekiri were readying themselves for defense or attack, Reyenieu claimed that the Itsekiri would only defend themselves. He stated he did not see any signs of renewed violence in the creeks, claiming that the Itsekiri had been chased from their homes and now only existed in large numbers in and around Escravos.

111. (C) The Escravos terminal, a joint venture of ChevronTexaco and the GON, is protected by approximately 200 soldiers of the Joint Task Force, "Operation Restore Hope," which was sent to the region in August 2003 to restore order in the Warri area. Beddow told ECONOFF that CNL is not taking any action as a result of their concerns of increased

violence; nor does he anticipate that JTF forces would engage in "inter-community battles." CNL has recently started a slow return to their production facilities in the surrounding riverine area, receiving JTF escorts and protection for their flow stations and their supply transports (septel).

¶12. (C) Brigadier General Elias Zamani, Commanding Officer of the JTF, told POLOFF on March 8 that rumors of increased violence exist, but the JTF is prepared to maintain the "fragile peace" and implement the decision of the Delta State Government to postpone LGA elections. He stressed that the right of the people to participate in the electoral process should not be abridged, but contended the postponement was in the best interest of peace. In general, Zamani characterized the situation in the Delta as suffering from "normal skirmishes," but that the JTF was containing violence, as opposed to controlling it. Zamani said he had no fears of renewed kidnappings, referring to the common practice of abducting oil company employees and contractors for ransom.

¶13. (C) As part of the Inter-Ethnic Dialogue, the Delta State Government promised to return the Itsekiri IDPs to their homes along the Benin River. The Itsekiri welcome the initiative, pending a security guarantee. BG Zamani told POLOFF that the JTF staff has drafted a security plan and will work together with the Delta State Government. Yet, no movement on the plan has been seen. Reyenieju has little confidence that either can produce what they have been promised. Enraged, Reyenieju stated his only enemy was the Delta State Government whom he chided for not providing basic social services or showing a sincere desire to address the root causes of the conflict. He renewed his claims that the Itsekiri would not go on the offensive or "transfer its anger with the government onto other groups," but would deal directly with the state government on these issues.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: The JTF does not have the capability to patrol and maintain security in the riverine area. Instead it has focused on securing oil installations, selectively limiting illegal bunkering activity off its coast through the use of USG-gifted buoy tenders, and keeping peace in the city of Warri. This situation on the ground makes it unlikely the Itsekiri will safely return to the Benin River in the near future. The postponement of the LGA elections is a win for the Ijaw, and may signal concessions from the Delta State Government in their favor. Ijaw youths have been folded into the state government by Governor Ibori, from which they appear to have benefited financially. Elsewhere in Delta State, people seem apathetic towards the LGA elections, as all have accepted that the PDP candidates will win.

¶15. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED. Ibori's motives, however, are unclear. It is uncertain whether he is keeping troublemakers easily accessible and manipulated, or whether the youths, who acted as hired thugs during the previous elections and now facilitate illegal bunkering, are being rewarded for their past and current cooperation. What cannot be ignored is the growing dissatisfaction with the status quo by the common Ijaw and Itsekiri living in the riverine area, who may not be easily controlled or manipulated from Warri. Claims by both sides that neither will initiate attacks seem hollow, especially given reports of provision hoarding.

¶16. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED. The reaction of the JTF is another wildcard. Even though stationed in large number at the Escravos Terminal, the JTF does not have a history of engaging unless their facilities are directly threatened. But recent clashes between military forces and residents of Warri suggest some troops have reached a breaking-point based on fatigue, impatience, or boredom (ref A). Candid comments to ConGen Officers by commanders showing concern over the potential backlash from the international community for any collateral damage inflicted on civilians may be lessening in credibility as the stalemate in the Delta drags on. Commanders may be faced with increased pressure from Abuja to take more aggressive action, utilizing unruly, poorly trained, and ill-equipped troops who can become unmanageable when responding to a threat or crisis

HINSON-JONES